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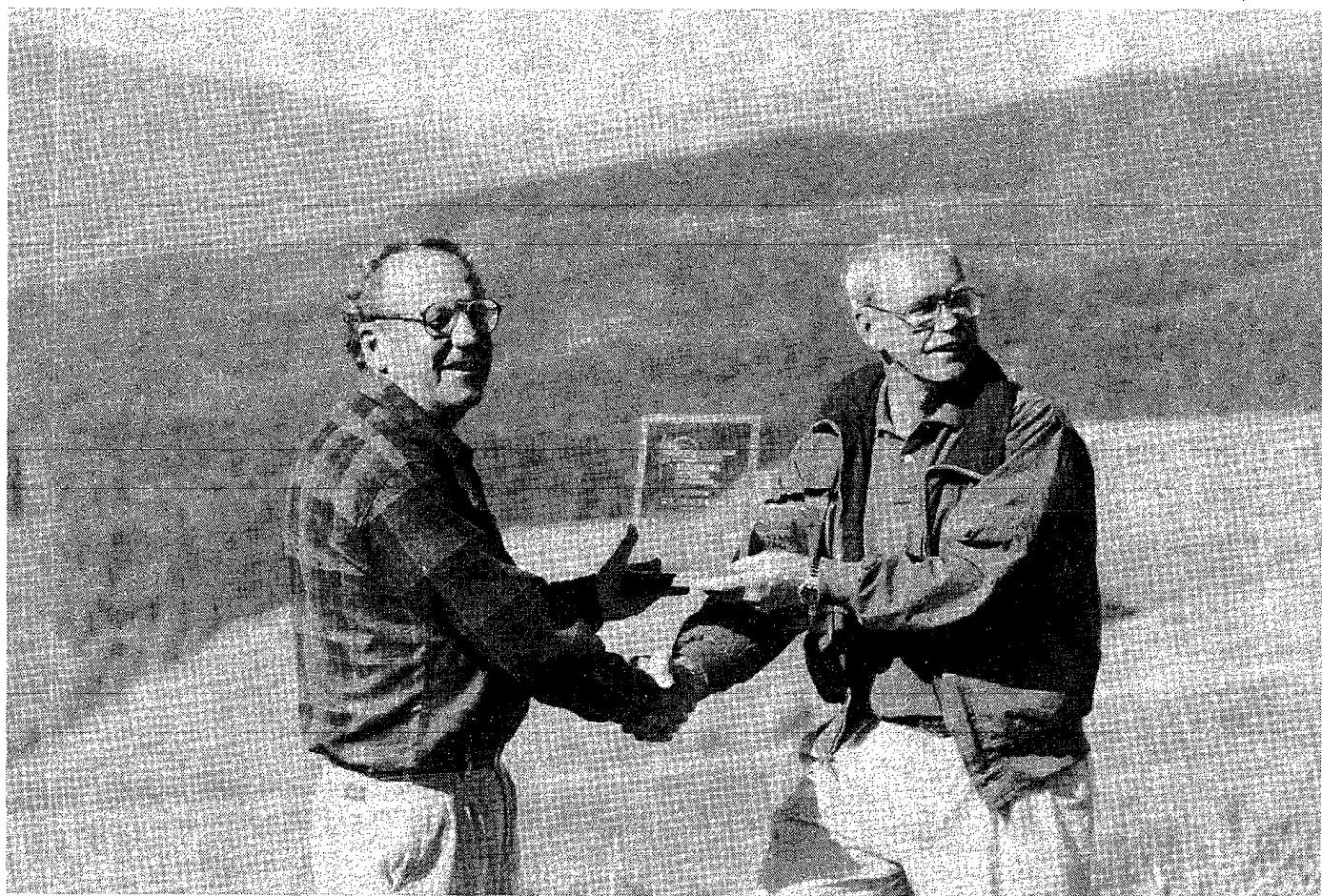
October 1993 Article, The Pick & Shovel Montana Mining Association



October 1993  
93-10  
(406) 443-7297

The Montana Mining Association  
2301 Colonial Drive  
Helena, MT 59601

## In Pursuit Of Excellence...



...W.R. Grace Closes  
Vermiculite Mine With Class

**The pick & shovel**

A monthly publication of The Montana Mining Association.

October 1993 98-10

2301 Colonial Drive  
Helena, Montana 59601

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**Frank Gardner, president of the Montana Mining Association, presents Alan Stringer, manager of the W.R. Grace operation, with the Association's first "In Pursuit Of Excellence Award." The photo was taken by Ace Wright, an MMA Board member, on top of Vermiculite Mountain, near Libby.**

Printed by  
Century Lithographers, Helena, Montana





**Alan Stringer, Manager of the W.R. Grace Project at Libby, points out reclamation at what once was the site of the mine's tailings impoundment.**

#### **Voluntary Reclamation Project**

## **W.R. Grace Closes Libby Vermiculite Mine After 67 Years**

By Gary Langley  
Executive Director  
Montana Mining Association

Freshly fallen snow shimmers under the morning sun in the 94,000-acre Cabinet Mountains Wilderness Area. Across the valley from the town of Libby, a large branch antlered bull elk darts across the road leading to the summit of Vermiculite Mountain. Twenty to 30 elk usually graze in this vicinity on the lush grass that once was a tailings pile, now reclaimed.

Near the summit, deer and elk roam on slopes, now covered with grass and trees, where heavy equipment once dug vermiculite from the hillside and trucks hauled the ore down the hill to the mill.

Alan Stringer, manager of the operation, points to a grassy meadow.

"That's where my office used to be," he said.

Until three years ago, the meadow also was the site of a 10-story mill, ore storage shed and

other buildings associated with the mining operation. They now have been dismantled. There is no evidence that they once even existed.

More than 100 million tons of rock and dirt was taken from Vermiculite Mountain from

**"We have proven that a mine can exist in a scenic area and that we can succeed in closing it—removing it from the face of the earth."**

**—Alan Stringer**  
**W.R. Grace Mine Manager**

1923-1990, first by the Zonolite Co. and then W.R. Grace. Only 800 acres of the 3,500 acres on Vermiculite Mountain was ever disturbed.

The mine closed in 1990, the victim of a sagging economy and diminished demand for vermiculite, once a major component of insulation used in the construction industry. At

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# Grace Closure

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its peak, the operation employed more than 250 Lincoln County residents and contributed \$6 million a year in taxes and wages to the local economy.

The operation was grandfathered under modern hardrock reclamation laws. Except for 14 acres, no topsoil was stored in anticipation of reclamation.

The company had posted a \$468,000 bond with the state, an amount not even close to those required of newer operations and not nearly enough to reclaim the disturbance. Once the mine closed, the company could have walked away.

But W.R. Grace is a community booster. In addition to the salaries and taxes it paid during its 67 years of operation, the company contributed to many community projects in a low-keyed manner that defied any self promotion. To have abandoned the mine would have left its work in Libby undone.

So the company voluntarily undertook a \$10-million project to reclaim the mine. The three-year job was done by 20 W.R. Grace employees who were kept on the payroll. The job was particularly difficult because most of the mining was done without anticipation of reclamation.

"We wanted the job to be done by W.R. Grace employees, not outsiders," Stringer said.

Where the tailings pond once was, there is now a green meadow. The dam, which once held back water and sediment, now holds back only dirt, grass and trees that were selected by soil scientists to conform with the area's soils, typography and climate. The dam itself has been modified in order to withstand a worst case scenario flood.

"I'm proud of what we did here," Stringer said.

The land will be used for something else, but mining probably will never occur there again even though there are sufficient reserves to last another century.

Last month, the Montana Mining Association Board of Directors toured the site and presented Stringer and W.R. Grace with its first "In Pursuit of Excellence" Award for voluntary reclamation work. Association President Frank Gardner said the award will continue to be

presented for outstanding achievements in mining as events merit.

"We have proven that a mine can exist in a scenic area," Stringer said. "And that we can succeed in closing it — removing it from the face of the earth." ↗



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